

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose and Need

Inventoried roadless areas comprise 58.5 million acres, or 31% of National Forest System (NFS) lands. These areas possess social and ecological values and characteristics that are becoming scarce in an increasingly developed landscape. While NFS inventoried roadless areas represent about 2% of the total landbase of the United States, they provide significant opportunities for dispersed recreation, large relatively undisturbed landscapes that provide privacy and seclusion, and are often sources of water that communities treat and distribute for public use. In addition, these areas provide a bulwark against the spread of invasive species, often provide important habitat for rare plant and animal species, conserve biological diversity, and provide opportunities for study, research, and education.

The Forest Service has the responsibility for resource use and conservation on all NFS lands. The public has expressed great interest in the conservation of roadless areas, and in recent years, roadless area management has been a major point of conflict in the adoption of land management plans on many forests and grasslands. Given the many benefits provided by these areas and the history of controversy surrounding their management, the Agency has determined that there is a need for national level rulemaking to conserve inventoried roadless areas.

The purpose of this action is to immediately stop activities that pose the greatest risks to the social and ecological values of inventoried roadless areas. To respond to this purpose and need, the Forest Service decided to limit the scope of the action to road construction, reconstruction, and timber harvest. These activities were selected because they occur on forests and grasslands throughout the nation, have the greatest likelihood of altering landscapes, often cause significant landscape fragmentation, and often result in immediate, long-term loss of roadless characteristics. In addition, the Forest Service developed alternatives ways for the Tongass National Forest because of its unique social and economic conditions.

Public Comment

To initiate a rulemaking on roadless area conservation, the Forest Service published a Notice of Intent (NOI) on October 19, 1999. The public provided over 517,000 comments on the scope of the initiative. On May 10, 2000, the Forest Service released a proposed rule and draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) on which the public provided over 1.1 million responses.

Using these comments, the Forest Service identified and summarized 6 major issue categories:

1. Public access;
2. Identification of other unroaded areas;
3. Exemptions and exceptions;
4. Environmental effects;
5. Local involvement; and
6. The effect on communities with strong natural resource affiliations.

A variety of opinions were expressed in each of these categories. For example, under Public Access, some suggested national prohibitions should be applied to all or certain activities in inventoried roadless areas while others advocated that decisions on access be made at the local level. These issues were used to guide the process in one or more of the following ways:

- To determine the scope of the proposal;
- To develop a range of alternatives;
- To direct the analysis of potential environmental, social and economic effects;
- To identify possible mitigation; and
- To ensure that the Agency is operating within legal authorities.

Based upon public comment and further analysis, the Forest Service developed and analyzed a number of alternatives.

Alternatives Considered

Public comments and the purpose and need led the Forest Service to develop the two sets of alternatives this final environmental impact statement (FEIS).¹ The first set includes four prohibition alternatives, including No Action, that cover the range of prohibited activities in inventoried roadless areas. The second set includes four alternative ways to apply the prohibitions to the Tongass National Forest.

The Agency also developed a third set of alternatives (procedural Alternatives A through D) in the DEIS. Analysis of comments on the DEIS for the Roadless Rule showed that there was confusion about how the procedural alternatives would be implemented. Public comments on the proposed Planning Regulations and Agency comments on the DEIS for the Roadless Rule also suggested that the procedures for roadless area protection were best suited for the Planning Regulations. Upon review, most of the roadless area characteristics identified in the DEIS and proposed Roadless Rule were similarly required by the Planning Regulations. Therefore, the Forest Service determined that the procedures contemplated in the Roadless Rule should be an explicit part of the plan revision process, and addressed them at 36 CFR 219.9(b)(8) of the final Planning Regulations. By making small changes to the Planning Regulations, the procedural alternatives discussed in the DEIS were not needed as a part of the Roadless Rule and were removed from the FEIS.

¹ The Forest Service also examined a number of other alternatives, but they were eliminated from detailed study for a variety of reasons. See Chapter 2.

Prohibition Alternatives

Alternative 1

No Action; No Prohibitions

Alternative 2

*Prohibit Road Construction and
Reconstruction Within Inventoried Roadless Areas*

Alternative 3

*Prohibit Road Construction, Reconstruction
and Timber Harvest Except for Stewardship
Purposes Within Inventoried Roadless Areas*

Alternative 4

*Prohibit Road Construction,
Reconstruction and All Timber Cutting
Within Inventoried Roadless Areas*

There are certain exceptions that apply to all the alternatives. These include situations where the responsible official may authorize road construction or reconstruction in an inventoried roadless area when:

- A road is needed to protect public health and safety in cases of an imminent threat of flood, fire, or other catastrophic event that, without intervention, would cause the loss of life or property;
- A road is needed to conduct a response action under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA) or to conduct a natural resource restoration action under CERCLA, Section 311 of the Clean Water Act, or the Oil Pollution Act;
- A road is needed pursuant to reserved or outstanding rights, or as provided for by statute or treaty; or
- Realignment is needed to prevent irreparable resource damage by a classified road. The road must be deemed essential for public or private access, natural resource management, or public health and safety, and the resource damage associated with the road cannot be corrected by maintenance.

Several other optional exceptions were developed to mitigate the economic and social effects of the prohibition alternatives. Under these optional mitigation measures, if included in the final rule, road construction and reconstruction in any inventoried roadless area may be authorized when:

- Reconstruction is needed to implement road safety improvement projects on roads determined to be hazardous on the basis of accident experience or accident potential;
- The Secretary of Agriculture determines that a Federal Aid Highway project authorized pursuant to Title 23 of the United States Code is in the public interest or consistent with the purposes for which the land was reserved or acquired, and no other feasible alternative exists; or
- A road is needed for prospective mineral leasing activities in inventoried roadless areas.

In conjunction with, but independent of this rule the Chief of the Forest Service intends to work with affected States and communities and to pursue funds to help them respond to economic changes that may result from implementation of the final Roadless Rule in the following ways:

- Provide financial assistance to stimulate local planning and plan implementation of community-led transition programs and projects in communities most affected by changes in roadless area management;
- Through financial support and action plans, attract public and private interest, both financial and technical, to aid in successfully implementing local transition projects and plans by coordinating with other Federal and State agencies; or
- Assist local, State, Tribal and Federal partners to work with communities most affected by the final roadless area decision.

Tongass Alternatives

Tongass Not Exempt

*Alternative Selected for the
Rest of National Forest System Lands
Would Apply to the Tongass National Forest*

Tongass Exempt

*Alternative Selected for the
Rest of National Forest System Lands
Would Not Apply to the Tongass National Forest*

Tongass Deferred

*No Alternative Selected at This Time; Determine
Whether Road Construction Should be Prohibited
in Inventoried Roadless Areas on the Tongass
as Part of the 5-Year Plan Review*

Tongass Selected Areas

*Prohibit Road Construction and Reconstruction in
Old Growth Habitat, Semi-Remote Recreation, and Remote
Recreation Land Use Designations, and LUD IIs²
within Inventoried Roadless Areas on the Tongass*

Under a mitigation measure developed as part of the Tongass Not Exempt alternative, the final rule may delay implementation of any prohibition alternatives on the Tongass National Forest until 2004 as an economic mitigation measure to ease the transition for communities most affected by changes in management of inventoried roadless areas.

² The LUD II designation is assigned to 12 areas that were allocated for special management by the Tongass Timber Reform Act. The desired condition in these areas is that of an extensive and generally unmodified natural environment that retains its original wildland character.

Environmental Consequences

Effects of The Prohibition Alternatives

Effects of the prohibition alternatives are summarized in Chapter 2, Table 2-1, and fully explained in Chapter 3 of this FEIS. Under the No Action Alternative (1), no rule prohibiting activities in inventoried roadless areas would be issued. Current management plans would continue to guide forest and grassland management. This alternative allows the most road construction, reconstruction, and timber harvest of all the alternatives. Over the next five years, 232 miles of road per year are planned to be constructed and reconstructed in inventoried roadless areas; 125 miles of these are planned for timber harvest purposes. The planned timber offer from inventoried roadless areas under this alternative is 220 million board feet, or 7% of the 3.3 billion board feet offered per year on all NFS lands. Of that 220 million board feet, 147 million board feet is expected to be purchased and harvested.

Road construction, reconstruction and timber harvest would lead to further roadless area fragmentation and loss of roadless characteristics. This may also have adverse effects on water quality and quantity, native plant and animal habitat, and dispersed recreation opportunities available to the public. Furthermore, this alternative could also lead to a loss of non-commodity values such as ecological values associated with ecosystem health and spiritual or aesthetic values such as one's ability to experience solitude and personal renewal in wild areas.

At the same time, the No Action Alternative allows the most opportunities for stewardship activities that require road building to control insects and disease and reduce fuel loads, although the Forest Service plans to focus most treatment activities in areas that are already roaded. In addition, this alternative allows continuation of planned timber offer thereby avoiding any adverse economic impacts to communities dependent on timber harvest-related jobs in inventoried roadless areas.

Alternative 2 prohibits all road construction and reconstruction in inventoried roadless areas. Planned road miles would be reduced by 75%, with the remainder still allowed under the exceptions. Lack of road construction would decrease the projected timber harvest in inventoried roadless areas from 147 to 39 million board feet per year. This alternative would result in a one-time loss of 607 timber-related jobs and an associated \$27.8 million in personal income per year. Alternative 2 would also have an effect on the number of planned stewardship activities in inventoried roadless areas to control insects and disease and reduce fuel loading, since roads may not be built to access areas for these purposes. This prohibition on road construction would limit the amount of future habitat fragmentation in these areas, have positive effects on biodiversity, water quality, and maintain current opportunities for dispersed recreation. Alternative 2 would also benefit spiritual and aesthetic values associated with inventoried roadless areas.

Alternative 3 would prohibit all road construction, reconstruction and non-stewardship timber harvest in inventoried roadless areas. However, since a large amount of timber harvest would already be foregone due to the road building prohibition, the effects of this combination would not be substantially different from the effects under Alternative 2. Timber harvest volume would be reduced from 147 to 20 million board feet per year. An additional 123 timber-related jobs and \$5.3 million per year in personal income would be affected under this alternative compared to Alternative 2. This alternative would provide some incremental environmental benefits to watershed, air, and native plant and animal resources, since it allows only stewardship timber harvest. It may also provide additional dispersed recreation opportunities and protection of non-commodity values. There would be an anticipated incremental increase in the adverse social and economic impacts under this alternative compared to Alternative 2 due to the elimination of non-stewardship timber harvest.

Alternative 4 would prohibit all road construction, reconstruction and timber cutting for any purpose in inventoried roadless areas, with the sole exception of harvest needed for protection or recovery of threatened, endangered, or proposed species.³ Under this alternative, no timber would be harvested and 886 timber-related jobs and \$39.5 million per year in personal income would be affected. Limited tree cutting could occur incidental to other management activities, such as personal use firewood and Christmas trees, trail construction, hazard tree removal, fire line construction and maintenance of property boundaries. This alternative would result in additional but small increases in both environmental benefits and adverse social and economic impacts over Alternative 3, since all timber cutting would be prohibited. The potential also exists for some adverse environmental effects due to restrictions on stewardship harvest that may be needed for habitat restoration.

Effects of the Tongass Alternatives

Effects of the Tongass alternatives are summarized in Chapter 2, Table 2-2, and fully explained in Chapter 3 of the FEIS. Under the Tongass Exempt alternative, the Tongass would be exempt from the final Roadless Rule, and land management activities would continue as outlined in the 1999 Record of Decision for the Tongass Land Management Plan (TLMP). Projected risks to ecosystem health would remain unchanged, human uses would continue at levels projected under the TLMP, and social and economic values would be affected as described within the current TLMP. Under the current TLMP, the total projected timber offer within inventoried roadless areas on the Tongass is 108 million board feet per year, requiring 58 miles of road construction and reconstruction annually. Of the 108 million board feet, approximately 77 million board feet would be harvested each year. About two-thirds of the Forest's planned timber volume offered in the next 5 years

³ It is not anticipated that the exception for TEP species would be used frequently or for large-scale projects, but rather for conservation of specific habitat components necessary for conued species viability where a clear need is identified.

would be from inventoried roadless areas. This volume is approximately half of the total planned offer volume within inventoried roadless areas nationally.

Under the Tongass Not Exempt alternative, the alternative selected for other NFS lands would apply to the Tongass National Forest. The effects of implementing any of the prohibition alternatives would be more dramatic on the Tongass than other national forests or grasslands, since more roading in inventoried roadless areas is projected to occur on the Tongass than elsewhere. Under an optional mitigation measure developed for this alternative, the final rule may delay implementation of any prohibition alternatives on the Tongass until April 2004 to ease the transition for communities most affected by economic changes that may result from the final rule. For the various resources, no relevant differences in effects were identified among prohibition Alternatives 2, 3 and 4.

Applying Alternative 2, 3, or 4 would reduce risks to old growth ecosystems, species viability, and diversity, and would lower risk to fish and wildlife species that are valued for recreational hunting, fishing, and viewing and for subsistence. Similarly, the wild and unspoiled nature of many inventoried roadless areas would be maintained, thus conserving the remote and semi-remote recreational opportunities that are commonly sought on the Tongass. Application of any of these alternatives would also benefit those who value these areas for passive use values.

Prohibitions, however, would have substantial effects on the Forest's timber program and timber-related industry in Southeast Alaska, potentially resulting in a harvest reduction of 73 to 77 million board feet per year. Communities where the timber industry continues to be a cornerstone of the economy and where the Agency has a strong presence would especially be at risk of economic decline. The effect of applying Alternatives 2, 3, or 4 to the Tongass would be an estimated one-time loss of 364 to 383 timber-related jobs and an associated \$16.7 to \$17.6 million per year in personal income in Southeast Alaska. Additional impacts could occur from losses in Forest Service employment of 141 directly-related jobs and \$7.1 million per year in personal income.

The Tongass Deferred alternative postpones the decision regarding prohibitions on the Tongass to the local level at the time of the 5-year Plan Review in April 2004. At such time an evaluation of inventoried roadless areas on the Tongass would be completed to determine whether road construction and reconstruction should be prohibited in inventoried roadless areas of the Tongass. Under this alternative the beneficial effects of prohibitions applied immediately to the Tongass would be foregone for some ecological resources.

Under the Tongass Selected Areas alternative, road construction and reconstruction would be prohibited only within inventoried roadless areas in the Old Growth Habitat, Semi-Remote Recreation, and Remote Recreation land use designations (LUDs), and LUD IIs. Under this alternative, the scheduled timber offer from fiscal years 2000 to 2004 would be reduced from 176 to 128 million board feet per year through 2004. The direct effect of the reduction in harvest would be the one-time loss of an estimated 170 timber-related jobs and an associated \$7.8 million per year in personal income. Of the four selected areas addressed within this alternative, the most roading is projected to occur within the Old Growth Habitat LUD. Since these designations were specifically chosen for their value to old growth-dependent and disturbance-sensitive species, localized ecological benefits would be

expected under this alternative. Future recreational development, currently provided for in many land use designations on the Tongass, would likely occur along with the continued growth of the tourism industry in Southeast Alaska. The prohibition of roading within the Semi-remote Recreation land use designations could have detrimental effects on those future recreational developments.

Irreversible or irretrievable Effects

Implementation of any of the prohibition or Tongass alternatives does not require an on-the-ground action to occur. Therefore, the alternatives do not compel short-term uses, nor do they compel an irreversible or irretrievable commitment of resources.

Effect of the Roadless Rule with the Final Planning and Proposed Roads Policy Rules

Along with the proposed Roadless Rule (36 CFR §294), the Forest Service has developed two other rules, the final Planning Regulations (36 C.F.R. §219) and the proposed Roads Policy (36 C.F.R. §212). The Planning Regulations affirm sustainability as the overall goal for stewardship of the natural resources of each national forest and grassland consistent with the laws that guide the management of those lands. Sustainability entails meeting the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. The Roads Policy is designed to make the Agency's existing road system safe, environmentally sound, and affordable to manage. By developing these rules together, the Forest Service is able to ensure consistency in definitions and policy direction. The result of these rule-making efforts would be an efficient integration of the Agency's priorities and resources.

Preferred Alternative _____

The preferred alternative is designed to protect the increasingly important uses, values, and benefits of inventoried roadless areas, and to achieve the following objectives:

- Prevent activities that can most directly threaten inventoried roadless areas;
- Provide opportunities for achieving multiple-use benefits, such as dispersed recreation and vegetative treatments to reduce the risk of uncharacteristic wildfire effects, insect and disease infestations; and
- Accommodate the transition in the timber program in Southeast Alaska under the recent decision on the Tongass National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan.

The preferred alternative combines:

Alternative 3 with

Selected Social and Economic Mitigations

Prohibit Road Construction, Reconstruction and Timber Harvest Except for Stewardship Purposes Within Inventoried Roadless Areas, While Excepting Road Reconstruction Needed for Road Safety Improvement and Federal Aid Highway Projects

Tongass Not Exempt with

Selected Social and Economic Mitigation

Prohibition Alternative Selected for the Rest of National Forest System Lands Would Apply to the Tongass National Forest Beginning in April 2004

Effects of the preferred alternative are summarized in Chapter 2, Table 2-1. The following exceptions and mitigations would apply. The responsible official may authorize road construction or reconstruction in any inventoried roadless area when:

- A road is needed to protect public health and safety in cases of an imminent threat of flood, fire, or other catastrophic event that, without intervention, would cause the loss of life or property;
- A road is needed to conduct a response action under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA) or to conduct a natural resource restoration action under CERCLA, Section 311 of the Clean Water Act, or the Oil Pollution Act;
- A road is needed pursuant to reserved or outstanding rights, or as provided for by statute or treaty;
- Realignment is needed to prevent irreparable resource damage by an essential classified road that cannot be corrected by maintenance;
- Reconstruction is needed to implement road safety improvement projects on roads determined to be hazardous on the basis of accident experience or accident potential; or
- The Secretary of Agriculture determines that a Federal Aid Highway project authorized pursuant to Title 23 of the United States Code, is in the public interest or consistent with the purposes for which the land was reserved or acquired, and no other feasible alternative exists.

Finally, in conjunction with, but independent of this rule, the Chief of the Forest Service would work with affected States and communities and pursue funds to assist them in dealing with any economic changes resulting from implementation of the final rule. The Record of Decision and the final rule for Roadless Area Conservation will be published no sooner than 30 days after the publication of the Notice of Availability for this FEIS.

